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SUBJECT: POLL SHOWS VOTERS UPBEAT ON ELECTIONS

¶1. (SBU) The Asia Foundation on October 28 published its fourth annual nationwide survey of Afghan public opinion. Media coverage has focused on the finding that security is the main reason for greater overall pessimism among Afghans; while a plurality of 38 percent of believe the country is moving in the right direction, the trend is down significantly from 2004, when 64 percent shared this view. Looking ahead to presidential and provincial council elections in 2009, however, Afghans show a resilient optimism. According to the survey of 6593 Afghans across the nation's 34 provinces, 72 percent are confident that the government will competently organize the elections. The Independent Election Commission (IEC) trails only the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) among government institutions earning the public's trust.

¶2. (SBU) When asked, 77 percent of survey respondents say they plan to vote -- although such survey results typically exceed voter turnout. Still, more voter education would help the almost 50 percent who admit they do not know how to register or vote. Among media for such public outreach efforts, radio reaches 83 percent of this population, equally in urban and rural areas.

¶3. (SBU) This enthusiasm for elections draws on broad support for democracy as a system of government: 76 percent believe democracy is better than any other system. Most -- 68 percent -- are satisfied with democracy in Afghanistan. Afghans widely expect democracy will bring peace and freedom, and also less corruption. Sixty-six percent think a country can both adhere to Islamic values and have a democratic system of government.

¶4. (SBU) The survey results suggest most Afghans have a solid grasp of the idea of elections as a mechanism of accountability to voters. Increasingly willing to criticize this government's performance on combating corruption, improving security, and responding to growing economic pressures, Afghans are still confident their vote will make a difference -- 68 percent of respondents say yes, only a slight drop from 72 percent in 2007. This year 66 percent of respondents feel they can significantly influence government decisions, an increase of 17 percent since 2006.

¶5. (SBU) Security is the pivot for overall optimism or pessimism about Afghanistan's future, and the main reason for the greater overall pessimism that media reports of its survey have flagged. Responses vary greatly, however, by region. The south, unsurprisingly, has markedly greater concern about security and markedly less optimism about the future. At the national level, security is the top issue for 36 percent, followed by unemployment for 31 percent and high prices for 22 percent. At the local level, a majority of Afghans say they most want the government to provide, in rank

order, electricity, water, roads, and health clinics -- then security. The greatest concerns of women are illiteracy (45 percent) and lack of rights (24 percent.) Only in the southwest does security move ahead on this list, but still behind electricity. Among the 23 percent who do not plan to vote, security concerns (25 percent) trail apathy (33 percent.)

16. (SBU) The complete survey report, which covers additional topics, is available on line at asiafoundation.org.
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